

FROM THE UNIVERSAL MAGAZINE.

A GENERAL VIEW OF THE CARACAS.

[From Semple's "Sketch of the present State of the Caracas."]

AFTER ten days residence at Puerto Cabello, I prepared to return to Caracas, leaving my companion, who waited for a vessel bound to Curacoa. On the 6th of February, 1811, I set off, attended by my trusty Mulatto; and soon lost sight of the unhealthy flat of Puerto Cabello. In two hours I was amongst woods, and water-falls, and mountains, and clouds; and looked down with undiminished pleasure on the dark romantic glen which had so much delighted me in my descent. From the summit of the mountains I once more enjoyed a view of the extensive plain of Valencia, and descended to that ill-fated town. I saw again the pass of El Morro and the village of Mariara, where civil bloodshed was first to take place. Once more, I traversed the banks of the lake, and enjoyed from the top of La Cabrera a view which, as the sun disappeared, acquired new charms beneath the mild light of the moon. I again admired the thriving appearance of Maracai, and on the eminence which divides La Victoria from the plains of Valencia took a distant and farewell view of the lake.

From La Victoria, through El Consejo, I descended into the valley and bed of the Tuy, which I again traversed upwards of five and twenty times before reaching Las Coucuisas, at the foot of the mountains which separate the vallies of Aragoa from that of Caracas. On the summits of these mountains I once more felt the grateful influence of cold, once more saw valleys dark and deep without rivers or lakes, and viewed Caracas at the distance of twenty miles, presenting an appearance the most beauti-

ful and interesting. I descended towards this charming valley with a mind full of all the wonders I had seen ; and, finally, having left a brother in Caracas, I entered my residence there with feelings somewhat similar to those which a traveller experiences when after a long absence he visits his native home.

Thus have we traversed a small but interesting portion of the continent of America. Every where we have found a fertile soil, and, except in particular spots upon the coast, a pure and healthy air. Even the unwholsomeness of these situations is compensated by their exuberant fertility, and by the gradual adaptation of the inhabitants to the atmosphere in which they live. With little labour man here earns an easy subsistence, and the industrious European has never failed to acquire in time a certain portion of opulence and ease. Let us recapitulate some of the more obvious particulars, and add others as they may occur to our remembrance. We will then examine what has retarded, and long will retard, the progress of this country towards that perfection which some of its admirers so ardently contemplate.

We land at La Guayra. A heavy surf breaks along the shore, and we are obliged to watch the swelling of the waves to leap upon the wharf. Flocks of gray pelicans float upon the waves, from which they rise at intervals, and then plunge down upon their prey. We notice the fins of sharks above the water, whilst people are carelessly swimming near the wharf, and are told, that, by a sacred charm, these voracious fish have no power to do hurt between the two small capes that shelter the road of La Guayra. When we are farther credibly informed, that accidents never do occur ; being heretics, we attribute it to the constant noise of the breakers, and agitation of the water. From La Guayra to Puerto Cabello, high mountains border all the coast : rising generally, immediately from the sea. At intervals, rich valleys open, and the sides of the mountains are covered with the finest trees, whilst their opposite slopes towards the interior are bare, or covered only with inferior timber. The average height of this chain of mountains is about four thousand five hundred feet above the level of the sea, although the peak, which rises to the eastward and behind La Guayra, is upwards of eight thousand feet high. In this town, closely confined by steep hills, we do not stop longer than is necessary to taste the tropical fruits ; or perhaps to visit a wild glen which bounds it to the eastward, and to bathe in the cool stream, which there pours down from the hills. We pass the pleasant village of Macuta, a mile from La Guayra, and soon look down upon it, from the height of a thousand feet. We ascend, and, on the mountain tops, the European breathes with delight, the cool air of his native country between the tropics. We go on foot, and smile at the idea of a bad road form-

ing a defence to a great country. How charming is the view of the valley of Caracas at the dawn of day, when the mists slowly rising unveil the prospect, and linger in the form of white clouds on the tops of the surrounding hills ! We descend to the town, and pause anew to make our observations.

Four leagues to the eastward of Caracas, on a gentle eminence, from which springs gush forth, stands a pleasant village, originally inhabited entirely by Indians. To the westward, on the other hand, on the opposite side of the Guayra, in a small recess of the mountains, a white church tower, surrounded by huts, points out an establishment, formed by the missionaries. All throughout the valley are plantations of sugar, coffee, and maize. Irrigation is well understood, and its general use is favoured by the nature of the ground, which constantly slopes towards the east. The water is led in channels, from the upper parts of the stream, along the sides of the hills, and afterwards distributed throughout the fields. The same system is practised at the plantations on the Tuy, near Las Coucuissas, at La Victoria, and in the valleys of Aragoa. The use of the plough is unknown. All work is done with the spade and the hoe, and chiefly by slaves. The lighter work is performed by Indians, and free labourers, which last class is increasing rapidly. Maize and plantains form the basis of their food, to which are added, beef and garlick. The maize is generally eaten in the form of cakes, being first soaked, deprived of the husk, and then ground, or rather rubbed into a moist paste, by means of a roller, and a smoothed curved slab of stone. This operation falls to the lot of the women. Beef seldom exceeds two pence sterling per pound, although sometimes, for several days together, there is none to be procured, owing to the want of regularity in the supplies from the interior, or the droughts in summer, when herbage cannot be procured along the road. The meat, when meant to be kept, is, in a manner, torn in long slips from the bone, soaked in strong brine, and then hung over poles in the open air, to dry. At every butchery, flocks of carrion-vultures, of a disgusting appearance, regularly attend, and being seldom molested, become nearly tame. To them is committed the task of picking the bones, and removing all the offal, which otherwise, with the indolence of the inhabitants, would, in this climate, soon become intolerable. Poultry is scarce and dear ; a Spanish dollar being frequently the price of a common fowl. Mutton is unknown. Although this country has been colonized for nearly three centuries, the sheep has not yet been introduced upon these mountains, where it could not fail to multiply rapidly. The flesh of goats is used instead ; which, although sufficiently palatable when young, can never be compared for flavour, delicacy, and nutriment, with that of the sheep. Fish are

seldom procured good at Caracas. It is a journey of six or eight hours for a slave from the coast; which, in this climate, when added to other necessary delays, seldom fails to deprive them of their flavour. The mode of cooking is entirely Spanish, oil and garlick being necessary ingredients in most dishes, and both being imported, in large quantities, for that purpose. There is a dispensation from the pope, for eating meat in Lent, and on fast days, on account of the difficulty of procuring fish, in many parts of the interior. At the close of all entertainments, great quantities of sweetmeats are used, of which the creoles are exceedingly fond. In lieu of sweetmeats, the common people use coarse sugar, in the form of loaves, called papelon. It is also customary at feasts, even at the best tables, for the guests to pocket fruits and other articles as I have witnessed to my great surprise. Although, generally, a sober race, on these occasions, they drink liberally of strong liquors, in bumpers, to each other, or to favourite political toasts; a custom which they appear to have borrowed from the English. This they do standing up or walking about, recurring to the table, at intervals. Meantime the ladies sit mingled with them, or in a contiguous apartment, the doors of which are open. The conversation is free; for an Englishman, frequently too much so. Every thing may be said, provided it be but slightly covered. A very little ingenuity is accepted as an apology for the grossest allusions.

In a word, the general manners and customs of the province are those of Spain, by no means improved by crossing the Atlantic, or by the mixture of Indian and negro blood with that of the first conquerors. It may be laid down, as an axiom, that wherever there is slavery, there is corruption of manners. There is a reaction of evil from the oppressed to the oppressor, from the slave to his master. Here it has been weakened, by the general mildness observed towards domestic slaves; but it has not been destroyed, and, even should slavery be finally abolished, its influence over private life will long be felt. After great debates, the importation of slaves has been forbidden by the new legislature; although many still remain of opinion, that they are necessary to the prosperity of the country. During my stay at La Guayra, a vessel arrived from the coast of Africa, with negroes: but as she had sailed previously to the passing of the prohibitory law, they were allowed to be landed, and were sold immediately, at more than three hundred dollars each, upon an average.

In general, the owners of slaves are little anxious how they are supported, provided they perform the usual offices, and make their appearance on certain occasions of ceremony. This is a great source of dishonesty. Whenever a slave can by any means make up the sum of three hundred dollars to his owner, he is

free. He is not even obliged to give this sum at once, but may pay it in single dollars, or half dollars, until the amount be complete. A slave has also the liberty of seeking a new master, and may go about to sell himself. These, and other regulations, tend, in some measure, to alleviate the evils of slavery, and still more to evince, by their beneficial effects, how much preferable would be its complete abolition.

Almost the whole commerce of the country is carried on by Europeans, Spaniards, and by Islenos, or Islanders, from the Canaries. They buy and sell, are the merchants and the shopkeepers, in all the towns. A spirit of union, and frequently, an impenetrable provincial dialect, binds them together, and gives them great advantages in all their transactions. The European, who expects to see a number of purchasers in competition, is frequently surprised to find only one or two, until the bargain being completed, the whole who were interested in it, appear. The natives of the country, so far from considering this transaction of their affairs by strangers as a reproach to their indolence, turn it into a source of national pride. 'The Americans,' say they, 'have no need to go to Europe; but it plainly appears, that Europeans have need of us. We are not, like them, obliged to hawk our commodities over half the globe. Our rich and abundant products draw them hither, and convert them into our servants.' In this manner reason the Chinese, vain of their supposed superiority over all mankind. And in this manner might argue the savages of the South Seas, who behold Europeans visiting them, but who never visit Europe.

The manners of the towns, and in the interior, differ greatly, or rather they belong to different periods in the progress of society. After passing the great chain of mountains which borders all this coast, from the gulf of Venezuela to that of Paria, we come to immense plains, devoid of trees, known by the general name of Las Llanos, or the Plains. Beyond them are other ridges of high mountains, which the traveller beholds rising gradually above the horizon, like land when first discovered at sea. These plains afford pasturage to innumerable cattle, the proprietors of which reside in the great towns, leaving them to the care of slaves, or people of colour. Hence a population is rapidly forming of a character wholly different from that of the immediate descendants of Europeans, or the natives of the coast. A bold and lawless race, accustomed to be always on horseback and living nearly in a state of nature, wanders over these plains. Among them are many professed robbers, who render travelling dangerous, and are already beginning to form into small bands. They live almost entirely on the flesh of cattle, without regarding to whom they belong; killing an animal at every meal, and

after satisfying their hunger, leaving the remainder of the carcase to the birds of prey and the wild animals of the desert. These men are well known, and frequently pointed out in the villages, but the inefficacy of the laws leaves them at liberty, until some act of uncommon atrocity excites the attention of the magistrates. Even after being seized, they frequently make their escape, either through the carelessness of their keepers, or the delays of justice; and return with increased avidity to their former mode of life. In the villages and small towns thinly scattered over these plains, great dissoluteness of morals prevails. The mixture of races is a source of endless corruption, to which are joined a climate inducing indolence and voluptuousness, and the total absence of all refined methods of passing time away. The highest delight both to women and men, is to swing about in their hammocks, and smoke segars. Gambling to excess, and tormenting of bulls, are their principal amusements. Religion has no beneficial effect upon their morals; if they commit sins, they confess them and are forgiven. To all this is joined an apathy which is astonishing. Liveliness forms no part of their character; on the contrary, they generally speak in a mild and drawling tone, which gives the highest idea of indifference, and almost of a disinclination to the trouble of opening their mouths. When a little animated, however, this softness in the voice of the women, it must be confessed, is not unpleasing, until its monotony becomes tiresome to the ear of an European.

I have not entered into a detail of the various races which people this country, as they are composed of the same materials which exist in all the Spanish colonies of South America; and have been frequently and accurately described. Over all, as is well known, until very lately the European was considered as pre-eminent, frequently without any just cause. Next in rank were the creoles, or descendants of European parents, and then a long succession of the various shades of mixture with Indian or African blood. The late revolutions in this country have abolished some of these distinctions, and seem likely in time to destroy still more; the probable consequences of which are worthy of serious attention.